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Het wezen der kunst. Onderzoek naar de gronden der aesthetische waardeering

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THE ESSENCE OF ART

AN INQUIRY INTO THE GROUNDS OF AESTHETIC VALUATION

What is the essence of Art? This is the question to which in this book I have tried to give an answer. What properties make a thing into a work of art, or: What standard do we apply in our judgement of art? That this standard is of general application, that is to say that it is common to all men, may be taken for granted. We instinctively presuppose this, and attribute divergencies in aesthetic valuation to individual differences of taste, of artistic sense.

We shall have to examine what it is we admire in works of art, what we consider as aesthetically valuable. And as this admiration is a psychic phenomenon, and as man has arrived at such notions as "Art" and "Beauty" only by having experienced beauty, felt aesthetic admiration, our inquiry will have to be conducted on empirical and psychological lines.

On the one hand we must try to make ourselves more clearly conscious of the grounds of our aesthetic appreciation. On the other hand it is of vital importance to analyse works of art, and to make experiments by introducing changes into one or more of their elements. For if it can be proved that such alterations impair the aesthetic impression, we may safely conclude, that these elements possess aesthetic value. It will also be of use to draw a comparison between the sphere of the so-called "lower" senses (taste, smell) and the higher (sight, hearing) in order to try and find out, why no form of art has developed in the domain of the lower senses. And lastly the question arises why the decorative arts are generally considered aesthetically inferior to music, painting, literature, etc. By means of comparison and analysis these and other similar problems may possibly be solved.

First and foremost it will be necessary to determine what properties make literature, music, sculpture etc. into art. Each of these is treated separately in order to find the ultimate aesthetic norm applicable to it.

In the domain of sculpture and painting several aesthetically important factors can be indicated. Besides the force of expression we appreciate in these arts the stylization and many other elements. A summary of all the beauty-factors found here leads me to the conclusion, that we feel the greatest appreciation for those renderings of reality, which give evidence of a very peculiar vision, yet do not deviate to much from nature. We admire, for instance, a thorough-going stylization, which yet does not strike us as forced.

An illustration of our method as applied to music may be found in the example given as Nr XV on page 82. The closing of this musical phrase by means of the two chords of the second bar proves to be of fundamental aesthetic importance, because the rhythm is thereby suddenly interrupted. For if we allow the same rhythm to continue (as is done on the next page) then the great beauty of the passage disappears entirely. It is clear therefore that this beauty is due to the rhythmical variety. From the point of view of aesthetics the sentiments which music often seems to convey are not of primary importance, neither is the response to them in the listener. (And this also holds good for the other arts). In the last resort the beauty of music is determined by its purely musical structure, and depends upon unexpected turns deviating from what is customary, which, however, should at the same time be as easily comprehensible as possible (Musical find).

For literature, the art of abstraction, and other arts, such as the film, I have come to similar conclusions.

Contrary to what we find in the decorative arts (to which must be added abstract painting) all these arts have a certain base, a starting-point — in itself aesthetically neutral — to which the artist is tied, as e.g. in the plastic arts: reality, in music: the musical-psychological laws which demand that a musical composition or phrase should form a comprehensible, organic whole. And now it appears, when we sum up our conclusions in the various domains of art, that the highest beauty is found where the most uncommon results have been attained, provided always that the

starting-point mentioned above is not lost to sight. Thus we appreciate a picture that gives evidence of an uncommon vision of reality, which yet does not strike us as forced or unnatural; thus we appreciate literature on account of its uncommon expressiveness etc.

The decorative arts lack such a starting-point. Here the time-honoured norm obtains: Unity in multiplicity.

What all forms of art — the decorative arts included — have in common is the circumstance that they give scope to the artist's imagination. Imaginative power is the ultimate criterion for all the arts. And the difference in value between the decorative arts and the other forms of art seems to rest on the fact that in the former the imagination is so much freer because it is not bound by the starting-point referred to above. It is indeed this starting-point which enables the imagination to soar to greater heights. The restraint it imposes forms a measuring-staff with which to determine the greatness of the imagination. If the imagination were given unlimited freedom it would no longer have any aesthetic significance.

This seems to be the reason why in the domain of the lower senses there can be no question of art at all. For here there is no limitation at all, not even that of the decorative arts: "Unity", binding multiplicity; the sensations arising from taste and smell, which are qualitatively entirely different, cannot be united into a whole. And so the possibility of giving evidence of imaginative power is ruled out here, as imagination would be indistinguishable from arbitrariness.